

## Old Man, Look at My Life by maplemood

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**Summary:**

*(I'm a lot like you were)*

It's been months and Steve can't move on. From Nancy or anyone else.

# Old Man, Look at My Life

## Author's Note:

- For [TolkienGirl](#).

I planned on writing something that was mostly Steve/Nancy angst and under 3,000 words. Almost 7,000 words later, it's mostly Steve angst, but I hope you enjoy it. :)

Here's a story.

(He's never been any good at telling stories, but what the hell.)

Second—no, further back. First grade was the year little Stevie Harrington knew he was some hot stuff. Every year after has been more and more a matter of pretending; in first grade he was goddamn adorable, mop of brown hair, puppy-dog eyes and all. The photos don't lie. They show he had a mom who still bothered to take photos, and a dad who stuck around long enough to wave little Stevie off on his first day of school.

He felt like a king, then, and didn't think either of them had anything to do with it. He knows better now.

Anyway. This is not the Saga of Stevie's Fucked-Up Home Life. It's not the Saga of First Grade, either. It just starts there. Halfway through the year his mom picked up a new job; around the same time his dad started working late hours. Wham, bam, Steve was a daycare brat, screeching out his afternoons in a stranger's floral-patterned living room.

That was where he first met her.

(No, not her. Nance came later.)

For the rest of the year, Steve's path was clear: He was going to marry Barb Holland.

They all called her Barbie. Steve's pretty sure he started it; it's also

why he can't be totally sure she was Nancy's Barb after all. Seriously, though? Town like Hawkins, you're going to get more than one Barbara. He can accept that. More than one shy, redheaded Barbara? It'd be a hell of a coincidence.

They'd sit together if he wasn't tearing up the place with the other guys. Side-by-side on this mom's juice-stained couch, and Barbie read him the storybooks though she was a year younger, still in kindergarten. She read so much faster, and smoother, and Steve liked the sound of her voice so much better than his own.

Some guys—*Real guys*, whispers the voice in his head that sounds a bit like his dad and a bit like Steve himself, the voice that never goes away—some guys don't want their girls smarter than they are. But Steve's always fought for the ones way out of his league. Barbie hardly ever stumbled or screwed up the words. Never pitched the book across the room when she got frustrated, either.

Christ, she was exactly like Nancy. Not—it's an asshole thing to say (to do, whatever), comparing a dead girl to your ex, even if from a certain point of view, they're both your exes...look, *listen*, it's got nothing to do with anything except they were both so sweet, and so smart, and so...

So good. So much too good for him.

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*Bullshit.*

It sticks with him a month later. Nancy, drunk out of her skull, punch bleeding down her dress, all sweat and melting eyeliner—he should have stayed, should have driven her home, if Byers hadn't dropped by like a knight in shining armor God knows what could've happened to her—stumbling to get the words out. Telling him he didn't care. They killed Barb, and he didn't care.

He won't tell her. Could be it would help set this mess straight, but Steve has his pride left. What's left of what was left; it's about the only thing he does have anymore so he's not going to tell her that after the party he got in his car and drove, aimless, into a deserted,

lights-out cul-de-sac where he parked and cranked the music loud and punched the steering wheel until he thought his knuckles would split.

(They didn't. Steve can't ever go the full mile, especially when he's trying to.)

He cares. He didn't see it coming until it was too late, he never missed her until she was long gone, he's a bag of dicks and a half and he knows that—

Barb Holland is dead. She's dead because Steve dragged her best friend upstairs for a quick fuck. They visited her parents for months, they sat together in that cramped, sad little place going through the photo albums, they passed out the missing posters, and then Nancy, straight to his face, told him he didn't care. It was all bullshit.

If Steve could go back. It wouldn't change anything, it wouldn't matter, and what with his piece-of-crap brain there's no way he could come up with this little zinger in time, but if he could go back, and if this was one of Barbie's stories that always ended with the handsome prince getting the last word, if he could go back he'd say, *I'm not bullshit, Nance.*

He'd say, *You are.*

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She didn't mean to say it.

She did mean it.

Steve isn't sure which is worse.

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He's supposed to drop Dustin off. Be back for pickup by nine. That's what Steve signed up for, and that's what he plans on doing, except of course when he rolls up, nine p.m. on the dot, the dance is going full swing and Dustin is nowhere to be found. Steve considers hunting him down inside for all of a second—the kid's spent a whole month prepping for his big night. Now is not the time to harp on curfews.

He pulls into a parking spot instead. Cracks his door open, lights a cigarette. Steve's blowing his smoke out into the cold stars and wondering what the hell that was, cold stars; *you're not some kind of poet, Harrington*, when a shadow looms in his rearview mirror.

*Bat's in the trunk.* It takes him a long, deep drag to get over his first knee-jerk of a thought. Long enough for the shadow to slip between cars and make its way to his open door. Steve exhales, careful to aim away from its face.

"What's up?"

"Thought this clunker was yours." Hopper rumbles. The chief smells like cigarette smoke himself. It's too dark for Steve to get a read on his expression but he sounds...content, almost.

Huh. That'd be a first.

"Who're you waiting on?"

"Henderson," Steve says after a minute, though there isn't any point to hesitating. Hopper's well aware of what his social circle looks like these days. "Are they almost done in there?"

"Yeah, search me." He rests an arm across Steve's door. "If you want a better vantage point you can come on over. Wait with me and Joyce."

Whoa. Okay. Are cigarettes the only thing this guy's been smoking? Hopper's...he's a lot of things, most of which Steve isn't sure of yet, but Christ knows friendly isn't one of them. Or it wasn't. Steve leans back in his seat and takes another drag.

"Am I missing something here?" he asks.

With a grunt this close to passing for a chuckle, Hopper turns to go. "Bring your pack. We ran out."

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"I feel like such a degenerate," Mrs. Byers says. "Stealing cigarettes from a teenager."

"I got plenty," Steve assures her. "Need a lighter?"

If either Tommy H. or Billy Hargrove catches him smoking in the middle school parking lot with a woman old enough to be his mother, Steve may as well kiss his last shreds of former-King-of-Hawkins-High dignity goodbye. But both those two would take a red-hot poker up the ass before volunteering to serve punch at the Snow Ball.

And hanging around Mrs. Byers is easier when she's not strung out to the breaking point.

"How's the school year been for you?" she asks, passing the lighter to Hopper. "Nancy told me you were applying to colleges."

Of course. Steve flicks his ash onto the blacktop. "Not so much anymore."

"Oh no! Did—honey, aren't you cold?"

It takes Steve a second to catch up to that. By the time he answers "No," Mrs. Byers is wheeling on Hopper.

"Give him your coat, Jim."

"Hey, no. No," Steve stammers. "Chief, don't—"

"Better do what she says, kid." He's already shucking the thing. Hopper tosses it Steve's way—catch or let the special-issue, chief-of-police windbreaker land in an oil-slick puddle.

Steve catches it. It's not that cold out—they've had a couple of frosts so far, no snowfall—but shit, he's going to have to wear it now, isn't he?

"Drape it over your shoulders," Mrs. Byers suggests. "That's how models wear them, right?"

Jesus. No wonder Will talks about his brother like Creepy Cameraman Byers is the incarnation of cool. No wonder Steve's grateful when Hopper jumps in.

"I heard you were at the Holland girl's funeral."

"Barb," he says, hiding his balled fists deep in the chief's pockets. "Yeah, I went."

The first week of last month was a week of funerals; Bob Newby's got booked two days before Barb's. Steve never met the guy, but he ended up going to both, and he has to say that Bob's was better. Not fun, and, again, it's an asshole thing to do, rate funerals, but the kids knew Bob (he'd sit in on rounds of their god-awful-boring nerd game, the one Dustin keeps bugging Steve to play; man must've been a full-on saint). They'd all sort of crowded around Steve, for no other reason than, he figures, Dustin started it. Sniffing, trying not to sniffle. Someone was sobbing by the end, only Steve can't say who since he had to go find that person hiding in the parking lot afterwards and promise them nobody else heard. It's a secret, held between the two of them.

Because apparently he's these brats' goddamn therapist now. Jesus Christ.

Nothing as bad as that went down during Barb's funeral, meaning Steve had all the time in the world to rattle around his own head, out of control, lost, spinning like a top. Mrs. Holland had photos set up by the gravesite, the full portrait in the wreath and then others. Barb in middle school, elementary, all down the line. One he hadn't seen, not in all those months of dinners at the house—this tiny redhead, minus the glasses, and it passed through his head, a blip so quick Steve thought he was going crazy: *Barbie*.

He got out of there as quickly as he could after that. Drove back home, remembering. He was going to keep an eye out for her next year. *First grade sucks*—Steve remembers saying that. *Don't worry 'cause I'm going to protect you*.

Welp. Mom started making enough to hire a babysitter just for him, and bang, there went little Stevie's first promise. Ten years down the road he was wondering why Nance had to drag her friend with the soup-plate glasses everywhere she went like a puppy. Poor girl wasn't enjoying herself any more than Steve was enjoying trying to make room for her.

Then she was gone. Then he didn't have to.

(There's this part of him—this twisted, pathetic part—that only wishes she'd disappeared somewhere else. So he wouldn't have to think of Barb alone, dripping blood, every time he remembers the curve of Nancy's ribs and the tiny little freckle below her collarbone.)

Nancy showed him the photo. She was right under his window, practically. How didn't he see? Why couldn't he have looked up for a damn second?

Steve promised he'd protect her. He was a kid then—everybody says dumb shit then. So what? He should have thought. He doesn't know how, but he should have *known*.

*It's okay, Stevie*, he remembers her saying. After he'd thrown a book or swiped someone's juice box like the little shit he was. *Let's go read some more.*

*It's okay.* He can remember that all he wants, but it doesn't help.

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Hopper grabs another cigarette, then tosses back both Steve's pack and his lighter.

He catches them one-handed. Automatically.

"That was a good thing you did," the man says. He leans back against the hood of his car, close enough to bump elbows with Mrs. Byers.

It's meant to be kind. Steve gets that. It also makes him want to punch Hopper straight in his dumbass caveman jaw.

"Bullshit," he says.

Hopper's eyes narrow. Before he can say anything Mrs. Byers hops off the hood.

"Oh, lord. Here they come. I'd better direct the herd our way."

She pats Steve's arm as she brushes past. Like his own mom would, if

she did things like that. Steve's glad she doesn't; it's the kind of move you dole out for kids. Still...

Mrs. Byers has a warm face. He never noticed that before.

Steve flicks the lighter open. Closed. Open. It's a new one. Still doesn't feel right in his hand, for whatever reason.

"Son," says Hopper.

Jesus *Christ*.

"Man, don't go there." He's a little surprised at how calm he sounds. "Okay? Just don't."

Thank God somebody slams into him less than two seconds later with all the force of an NFL linebacker.

"Harrington!" It's Max, and she sounds positively giddy. "Let me drive your car. Pleeease?"

She loops one arm around his waist in a weird, bouncy half-hug. Steve's never seen her close to anything he'd describe as "bouncy" before. Frankly, it's frightening.

"No," he says.

"Douchebag," she says happily. "Pleeease?"

"Was the punch spiked or something? Get out of my face, little orphan Annie."

Max backs up a little. Her face doesn't quite fall, but—shit, she's so cute, in her tiny sweater with that tiny braid coming loose from its clip. Steve reaches out to ruffle her hair.

"I've got a cop literally two feet away from me; what did you think I was going to say? Dipshit."

"Steve!" This time it's Dustin, his hairdo coming loose in stiff, hair sprayed clumps. "Dude, you won't believe—"

Without trying to, they maneuver him away from the cop car. Max doesn't have a ride home (of course she doesn't) so she'll be catching one with Steve and Dustin, and maybe—maybe—Steve'll let her in the driver's seat once they're within a block or two of her house. Dustin says his mom won't worry as long as he's back by ten. Simple as that, they're in the car and rolling out of the parking lot. No awkward goodbyes required.

It's times like these that Steve feels bad for bitching about them as much as he does. The little shits do come in useful every now and again.

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So it turns out Max and the Sinclair kid (Lucas—with all the names Steve has to remember Dustin might as well be best friend to a pack of lemmings) did more than dance. She doesn't tell him herself. She doesn't deny it when Dustin mentions the two swapping spit, either, so Steve figures it's as good an explanation for her disturbing new bounciness as any.

Good for them. He wouldn't have put those together but...yeah. He can see it. He can see it just fine.

"What won't I believe?"

"Huh?" Dustin's trying to press his clumps of hair back into place.

"In the parking lot, man. You told me—Max, you better buckle up—you said I wouldn't believe what happened." Steve flips on his turn signal. "Come on now. Spill."

"Oh. That."

Sudden silence. He catches Max glaring Dustin's way in the rearview mirror.

"It wasn't anything," Dustin says. "Just this stupid thing."

"Was this stupid thing cute?"

"Morons," Max groans, sounding reassuringly normal.

Dustin grins. This slow, small grin Steve suspects isn't meant for him. "I mean," he says. "If you'd call a supernova cute. Then yes, Steve, she was cute."

"What did I tell you?" He'd be lying if he didn't admit to feeling warm and fuzzy right now. Those five minutes spent styling the kid's hair in the passenger seat (since nobody else was going to introduce Dustin to the wonders of hairspray) were not in vain. "Smooth and stealthy, man. Smooth and stealthy."

"You guys realize," says Max, "that you both sound like total perverts?"

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He's through the front door before he remembers the jacket.

*Shit.*

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The year rolls on. School rolls with it—yep, and it still sucks ass. What else is new? Steve's grades get a little better. "A little" being the key words there. Nancy would help him if he asked. She'd be happy to, which is worse; Steve doesn't ask. He gets Dustin to check his Chem assignments, Max to read over his papers.

He'd have a decent chance of forgetting her if he knew she'd forgotten him. It's impossible, though; they're tangled together by Barb's death and Will's virus and a hundred other things. So Steve stays away. Nance is going steady with Creepy Cameraman Byers to boot—he's not about to ram in, bust up the cute little thing they've built for themselves. He's not that much of an asshole. He gets a job instead.

It's in this divey little place alongside the highway running out of town. Hammond's closed down last year after the owner shot himself in the head, but despite this monumentally depressing bit of history it's been opened back up, now half as popular as it used to be. Steve takes orders there Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. Works his ass off because he suspects the boss (who all the servers call Not-

Benny, usually behind his back) hates him. Before Steve came along Hammond's was the place old farts went to gum burgers and talk fishing. Now it's transformed into a hangout for kids.

"Dude, if I get you another milkshake your mom is going to kill me."

"We have been over this." Dustin clasps his hands atop the counter like he's Oliver Twist begging for more and Steve is...whoever didn't give Oliver more. Crap. He never read that one. Saw the musical, though.

"I am studying for my Spanish test. Which is tomorrow. Those milkshakes..." Dustin points to the three empty glasses stacked in the corner booth. "...are my fuel. Without them...could be I'm looking at a B average."

"Could be I'm looking down the barrel of a shotgun," says Steve. He sincerely hopes Ms. Henderson does not own a shotgun. "Comprende that."

At which point Max wiggles out of the same booth, where she and Lucas are sharing a bucket of cheese fries, to sprint to the counter and whisper, "Hopper's coming."

Ten minutes till his shift ends. "What, kid? What am I supposed to do about it?"

Max rolls her eyes. "I'm only telling you because you've been avoiding him for months."

"Okay, first of all, that's a lie," Steve snaps as the door creaks open and his stomach sinks. "That is a total l—hey, get back here! Hey!"

"Hey, Chief!" Max chirps as she races back to the booth, Dustin close behind. Little shits abandoning him in his hour of need, isn't that typical—okay, but if he does give Dustin another milkshake he'll come running back and Steve won't have to face—

"Two burgers."

Well, this is going to be punishingly awkward.

“Excellent choice, sir.” Better rely on the spiel. “Any toppings?”

“Ketchup, mustard, onions,” Hopper rattles off. His eyes are fixed on the menu. “And pickles. And... make those onions grilled, would you?”

“Of course,” says Steve. His out-of-the-can customer-service voice took him weeks to perfect. Now the kids think it’s hilarious. They’re snickering into the cheese fries.

“Will that be to go?”

“You bet,” Hopper answers, before going in for the kill: “So. You’ve been getting good use out of my jacket.”

Sweat prickles the back of Steve’s neck. He looks up. “Chief, I have it in my car. If—”

“Nah. Don’t worry about it.” Hopper’s eyes stay fixed on the menu. Steve thinks he spots a twinkle in one of them, which does not make the awkwardness one degree less punishing. “Joyce told me you were working here. Said the Wheeler girl told her.”

“Mmm.” Steve makes a sound he hopes is noncommittal. After ringing it up, he relays the order to Tina in the back, who has great news:

“It’ll be a couple minutes,” Steve says, grabbing a busboy’s tub already half-full of crusty dishes.

Hopper shrugs. “I can wait.”

The diner’s almost empty. Steve makes the rounds anyway. When he reaches the corner booth Dustin pats his arm, Lucas passes over the empty milkshake glasses, and Max hisses, “Say something!”

Steve snags a fry from right between her fingers. He pops it into his mouth, thinking, *Shit, kid, it’s not like that.*

It’s like...they don’t deserve his crap, right? Dustin, Lucas, and Max; they’re good kids so he doesn’t let it touch them. Nancy leaving him, his parents ignoring him. Barb. None of it’s up for discussion, and the

same stands for Hopper. Man's not thirteen years old, fine; he still has no right to nose around Steve's mess.

That's it. That's final.

He drops the tub off by the sink. Tina's got the burgers sizzling. Not done yet. Steve eyes the clock.

Five minutes.

"Hey. Harrington." Hopper props an elbow on the counter. "This—" his eyes take in the menu, the register, Steve's grease-speckled uniform, "are you gunning for shift manager or what?"

The look does it. The words Steve has heard before, from his dad, his mom, the dicks on the basketball team. Only they don't look at him the way Hopper's looking at him, with this kind of gruff blandness slapped over actual concern—at least that's what Steve thinks it is; he's not so good with words but reading faces usually comes easier. That goddamn look prickles under his skin.

"Not everyone's college material." He parrots the guidance counselors. Otherwise he'll snap. "Pretty sure you knew that, Chief."

"I'm not talking about college." As if it should've been obvious. "I'm talking about—kid."

"Me?" says Dustin innocently. If his ear were cocked any harder it would grow a size.

"Am I talking to you?"

"No?"

Hopper glares their way till Dustin, Lucas, and Max duck their heads over the cheese fries, muttering insults like a swarm of bees. "Kid," he says again. Not to them.

What can Steve say to that?

"Is this what you want?"

Hell, what can he say to *that*?

“It’s what I can get.”

The chief shakes his head. “Don’t sell yourself short.”

Let the man adopt one damaged teenager and suddenly he thinks he’s Mother Theresa. Steve leans across the counter, white-knuckling the edge. He lowers his voice because, again. This shit isn’t touching the kids.

“Man. I’m not a fucking idiot.”

Hopper’s face hardly twitches.

“Barb was in my yard. We both know that, okay? The Demo—”

Metal clatters in the kitchen. The sweat greasing the back of Steve’s neck goes cold.

“—that thing killed her right under my window. I never looked out—never even thought about looking out. I was a piece of shit.” It’s easier to say now, when he’s known for months. “And I failed her.”

His fingers hurt. Steve lets go of the counter, but they clench right back up; he steps back, stuffing them in his pockets.

*(Bullshit.*

*You’re bullshit.)*

“What else am I good for?”

It’s a rhetorical question. Hopper respects that, though only because Tina announces the burgers are ready right as he’s about to chime in, no doubt with some sort of pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps paternal bullshit. Steve darts into the kitchen to pack up the order—Tina’s totally capable of doing this herself, and, in fact, has already started, but he waves her away. There’s exactly a minute left to his shift and he’d rather spend it with the burgers.

But, like Dustin, Steve keeps one ear cocked towards the wide kitchen

window. It sounds like he and his friends've found a new topic to keep themselves busy.

"So when can we come over?"

"Not tonight." Hopper grumbles.

"Tomorrow night? 'Cause she really misses us."

"Dude! Say yes!"

"She borrowed my skateboard and I need it back."

"Say yes!"

Around the fourth "say yes" Hopper cracks. "Tomorrow night. Fine," he snaps, sounding overwhelmed for the first time since October. "But I'm not picking anyone up. You handle your own transportation, is that clear?"

The pride welling up in Steve almost evaporates. Christ. He can hear the phone calls now. *Steve, my man! This is your day off? Aw, it'll only take fifteen minutes, I swear. Twenty minutes. Thirty tops!*

When he ducks around the counter, balancing two steaming takeout boxes, Hopper hustles to grab them like he's being tracked by a pack of wolves. "These guys giving you a hard time?" Steve asks, all sunshine-in-a-can-may-I-help-you-sir. He flashes the kids a thumbs up, none too subtly.

"Always," Hopper grunts, back to utter deadpan. You've got to hand it to him; the guy never stays rattled for very long. "Kid's started craving these," he says, gesturing with one of the boxes. Steve shuffles sideways to avoid a blast of hot, fresh-grease steam. "Least it makes a change from all the damn Eggos."

Is Steve supposed to expect regular visits now? Are Hopper's stints of across-the-counter counseling going to become a weekly thing? If so, Steve's positive it'll all end with him launching over, trying to throttle Hopper, and—for the grand finale—getting his weakling ass snapped in two. A scenario that was definitely not covered in the training videos.

He smiles. “Hope to see you again soon, sir.” Slathering the canned sunshine on thick.

Then Hopper, ignoring the bite-me grin, claps Steve on the shoulder.

All right then.

It’s not completely unexpected. Steve’s been dreading an intervention like this since the Snow Ball. What surprises him is...him. (Himself, whatever.) He doesn’t pull away. He’s not even sure he wants to.

“You’re not bullshit, Harrington. Asshole, maybe, but not bullshit.” Simple and flat, as if it’s fact. Chief squeezes hard so Steve feels his touch down in the bone. “Once you got that figured out, we’ll talk.”

The two takeout boxes are clamped under his left arm. Squashed together, leaking steam—it all looks ridiculous but Steve can’t feel that ridiculousness. Can’t separate himself enough to *not* care.

What a goddamn hassle that is.

“At the station,” Hopper adds. There’s no threat there; at least not the kind of threat you’d expect. And a little warmth flares in his eyes—or Steve’s just another prick-wimp looking for that spark, looking for some old guy to kick his ass into gear, to give him a hundred reasons (excuses) for why the past doesn’t matter.

“Don’t hold your breath.”

Hopper’s grip slacks; Steve shrugs it off.

“See you around, son,” the man says, easily, like he’s already won the fight (somehow Steve feels he has, but he doesn’t let himself know that yet). He shifts the boxes back into his hands, nods at the kids (“See *you* around, chief!”) and brushes through the door. Job well done.

*See you around.*

It’s a threat. Or it’s a promise.

*See you around.*

*See you around.*

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“Dude!” Lucas flaps the papers in his face. “Look what he left on your windshield!”

“Steve?” Dustin’s voice is quieter, a little wary. “You all right, buddy?”

Max bowls over both of them. “Hey, spaz. You realize you got a job offer, right?”

“Offer to apply,” Lucas corrects her. “That’s not the same—”

He shakes himself, straightening out of his slouch. After clocking out Steve always heads out the back. Smokes a cigarette or two by the dumpster before heading home. Usually they calm him, filter the worst of the crap out. Till these little shits had to polish off their fry bucket in record time, come spilling into the evening and his peace like a bunch of yahoos.

“Why’re you wearing that jacket?” he asks.

“It was across your front seat.” Max huddles under the shoulders of Hopper’s windbreaker—it turns Steve into a scarecrow; wearing it, she’s transformed into a munchkin.

Right. His passenger side door doesn’t lock anymore. Steve can’t prove it, but he’s positive one of the kids slammed it the wrong way, socked a shoulder against the lock or something—dead set on destroying everything he owns.

“Lucas,” he says, puffing an aggressive breath of smoke their way. “Zip up your girlfriend’s jacket.”

Sinclair’s eyes cut across him sideways. “Why?”

“Because it’s cold out, man. Jesus.” Early March, gray and cutting. Of course Max doesn’t have a jacket—for her sake they all pretend it’s down to her being a California girl who doesn’t know how winters work. And it’s not, and it makes him madder day by day, but what’s

he supposed to do about it, what—

“You can keep it,” Steve adds.

Max scowls. She yanks the zipper chin-high herself. “This isn’t about me,” she says. “Or the stupid jacket.”

“So what’s it about then?”

“Jesus, Steve—read the damn papers.” Lucas again. He all but stuffs them into the older boy’s hands. Steve stares down at them, wondering if he should go ahead, set the whole mess alight.

It is an application. For the police academy at the community college two towns over, and paper-clipped to it is a blank parking ticket, scrawled over on the back. Blue ballpoint on reflector-vest orange. Steve squints to read.

*Harrington. Don’t fail yourself.*

Uh-huh. Like that’s the issue here.

*Or anyone else.*

“Man.” Lucas bounces in place a little. “Imagine Steve as a police officer!”

*Yeah, keep imagining.* Steve looks up, papers clamped in his hands, cigarette clamped between his teeth. “I’m not going.”

Lucas’s grin slips.

“Why?” Max searches his face. Must not like what she sees; in the next minute she’s almost spitting venom. “Oh my God, Harrington. You are such a frigging idiot.”

“Mmm. Not sounding so great yourself, Maxie.”

“Frigging troglodyte!”

“Guys!” Dustin raises his voice. “Steve can do what he wants!”

“He isn’t doing what he wants!” she fires back. “He isn’t doing

anything because he's *afraid!*"

"*Leave him alone!*" Dustin all but yells—Max starts, and Lucas starts, and Steve starts. There's something in Dustin's voice. Not fiery. Sharp. Sharp as a blade.

"Go!" He's really yelling now. "Just go!"

Max's eyes flick from Dustin to Steve, pinballs in her blanched-white face. Eventually Lucas grabs her arm.

"Come on, Max," he mutters.

She doesn't move.

"Come on."

Max unzips the coat. She shrugs out of it, lets it fall to the oil-smeared, trash-flecked blacktop. Then follows Lucas.

Dustin bends to pick it up.

"You know she's right."

He sounds about as pissed. Steve watches him, this twiggy middle-schooler with his tangle of hair and his messed-up bones and his little-kid dentures, burning up inside with some kind of holy fire, and feels nothing. Nothing but tired. Cigarette smoke streams out of him like steam from a broke down car.

"That's none of your business," he says. Can't even work up the energy for a good snarl.

Dustin wheels on him. "But our problems are yours?"

Something sparks then, deep in his gut—Steve inhales too fast, and instead of putting it to good use he bends forward, coughing up a storm, the spark burning a hole through his belly.

"What did you say, dipshit?" he finally wheezes.

"You do that," Dustin says. "Get all caught up in our shit 'cause you

don't want to think about yours."

"I d—"

"It's getting old, man."

"Dustin," he says. The burning's gone; it's eaten all the way through. Steve's back aches. His feet feel like two tons of cement and all he wants is to finish his cigarette, hop in the car, go home and to sleep. Some peace. He hasn't had any peace since he got Nancy Wheeler up into his bedroom, and she got him suckered into all the weird shit brewing underneath and around this stupid town.

Since Barb.

"Dustin," Steve repeats. "Listen, shithead, what else am I supposed to do?"

The kid stands a foot off from the dumpster, Hopper's jacket slung over one arm. There's a smudge of cheese crusted in the corner of his mouth. Like he's never heard of a napkin before.

"A lot," he snaps. That simple.

"There're things I did." It's not supposed to touch them. He promised himself—it was never supposed to touch them. "I can't fix them. I can't go back. I can't—what're you doing?"

"We fixed this up for you," Dustin says solemnly, his finger pressed into Steve's cheek, a little sticky from the cheese and milkshakes. "Don't make us regret it."

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There's this hole.

(He's no good with metaphors—what the hell.)

There's this hole. He's down in the pit of it, has been for a long time now, longer than he likes to think—longer, though, than he first realized. And this hole, it's full of...full of things, Nancy's stained blouse and her sloppy-drunk tears, Barb's dripping blood, his own...

emptiness; it's full of the kid he used to be, the one bouncing off walls and slamming off couches, the one always yelling *Come on, Barbie, let's go outside, come on, come on*, and he's sure now that someone was telling her to be nice to him, since he had no one else.

He could climb out. Slowly, but he could.

+

If he climbs out, he'll forget. Slowly, but he will.

+

He doesn't deserve to.

+

"Get off me."

Dustin doesn't move. "I'm serious, Steve."

"So am I."

The hand drops.

"I'm where I need to be." And when did he start needing to explain himself to a thirteen-year-old? When did Lucas's hoping and Max's snapping and Dustin's poking—what do those things mean to him now, when did they start meaning anything at all? "It's okay."

"It's not."

"Dustin—"

"You're smart. You're cool—like, the coolest guy I've ever met—and you're *good*. I know you don't think so, but you are."

A snag in the kid's voice. Steve lowers his.

"Man, don't cry."

"I'm not crying!" Dustin takes a deep breath anyway. "You're just—you're going to waste it."

Steve flicks his cigarette to the ground, grinds the butt out under the granny-thick sole of his no-skid sneaker. Enough smoke for one day. He feels shaky from the coughing. Wheezy. Sick.

“There’s nothing to waste.”

“No! Quit feeding us that line of bullshit. It’s not true. You know it’s not true. It’s not—”

Dustin is back to practically yelling. There’re plenty of other ways to shut him up, but the only one Steve has down to an instinct is this: he grabs the kid, hard, with both arms, and pulls him close.

“It’s okay. It’s okay, bud. Quiet down. It’s okay.”

“It’s not.” Dustin is shaking.

“It’s okay.” Steve is shaking. Dustin’s skull knocks against his chin—he’s getting taller every day; soon enough this won’t work anymore; soon enough he’ll be able to throw Steve off. He could now, if he tried hard enough.

He doesn’t.

“Nancy asked me about you.” Dustin throws that out like a punch, as if he expects Steve to be surprised. “At the Snow Ball. She danced with me.”

*I mean, if you’d call a supernova cute.*

“I wasn’t going to tell you ‘cause I know how much you like her. Plus she asked me how you were doing, and Max said you wouldn’t want to know Nancy was worrying about you.”

*You’re not bullshit, Harrington.*

“Nancy’s a good person. She wouldn’t worry about you if you weren’t good, too.”

Nance has every reason to believe he isn’t. Steve tightens his arms around Dustin, shivering when one of the kid’s curls tickles his cheek. Pain blossoms in his gut, or beneath his breastbone, hard and jagged

as a stitch—he'd bend over if he wasn't afraid he'd spear himself on it. It sticks around long enough to leave his eyes stinging. Then fades.

A snap. Crack. Breach in the wall.

Dustin makes a noise. Tries to turn it into a laugh, though it's too broken and too wet; that's what lands on Steve like a punch. "Fuck." He snorts the wet back up his nose. "If you're not going to listen to us, listen to her."

"Okay," Steve says, "Okay, okay. I know. It's okay."

It's not. The voice in his head makes sure to remind him. *You promised, asshole.*

He promised he'd never hurt the kids.

"I know," says Steve. A cold March wind cuts through both of them, swirling the trash around their feet. Steve bends, sheltering his face in Dustin's hair.

+

The problem. The problem is. The problem is that there's the Steve Steve knows, and there's the Steve Dustin and Nancy and Hopper and everyone else think they know. That's the Steve Nancy worries over and Hopper sees right through, the Steve Dustin loves—and the Steve who is so different, so not a part of what he actually is, that some days Steve feels erased by him. Others, swallowed up. Sometimes, only sometimes, is the Steve everyone else believes in enough to set him free.

The problem is. The problem is he's not brave, not good, and he can't be what they want him to be. The problem is, he has to, somehow. The alternative is failing Dustin, and Max, and Lucas. Failing Hopper.

And Nancy.

+

"I'll give it a try," he says. "Are you happy now, dipshit? Probably won't get in anyway."

"You are so full of shit, Harrington." Dustin snuffles. He wraps his own arms around Steve, squeezing until something—fuck knows, could be a rib—pops.

The papers swirl where Steve dropped them, around his feet with the trash. Crumples napkins. Oily, transparent twists of waxed paper. The parking ticket whips free of its clip and pinwheels away, across the gravel and grass, into the dark scrim of trees. A day-glo orange ghost in the underbrush.

*Don't fail yourself.*

He's not worth as much to himself as he used to be. Nowhere near. *Or anyone else*, that sticks in Steve's craw, deep and hard. Like Hopper must've known it would.

+

They circle around Hammond's to reach Steve's parking spot—there Max and Lucas are. Cross-legged on top of the hood, arms looped together. The wind catches Max's loose hair and slaps it sideways, across Lucas's face. He bats it away, coughing, and breaks into a small grin when he spots the application clutched in Steve's hand.

"Save it," Steve snaps, yanking open the broken passenger door to shove the papers under the driver's seat. They're a little crumpled, stained at one corner. Otherwise salvageable. A muffled conversation starts up between all three and stops as soon as he surfaces again.

Steve drapes both arms over the door, leaning against it. Jesus. He needs an hour to himself and an hour off his feet and something that'll go down hot and easy. He needs to be alone. He needs time to think. "Max," he says. "Take the jacket."

She tosses a glare at him, then flips it back to the slightly trash-scented windbreaker draped over Dustin's arm. "I don't want it."

"Shit, I don't want it anymore, either." Steve hears the edge in his voice, pulls it back. "It's not a *gift*, asshat. I need someone to take it off my hands, okay?" He combs a wilted section of hair off his forehead. "Can you do that for me, Max?"

"I don't know." Her face is still pale, pasty in a way that Steve's learned means she's more hurt than angry. "Can you stop being such a waste of space?"

When did they get so damn concerned about what he does or doesn't waste? Steve tips her the G-rated version of the old King-of-Hawkins-High smirk. It always had Nance smiling back; and her his toughest audience.

"No promises."

Max scoffs, but her lips quirk at the corners. Nancy Wheeler remains unseated.

"You're a moron."

"Takes one to know one," Steve says amiably. He almost chokes on a yawn. "All right, you shits, get your bikes and load them in the back. I'm driving you home."

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It's the flicker of red as Max pulls her hair out of the jacket collar. Dustin and Lucas trash-talking each other's rides as they heave them into the trunk. Back, and back and back, and Max's red becomes Barb's, and Dustin and Lucas's chatter becomes Steve's, and it's the two of them, behind the rose-patterned couch that always smells like apple juice.

*First grade sucks, Barbie.*

Eyes widening under her Minnie Mouse headband, then rolling—she never does have to say much. He reads it all on her face.

*No, seriously. People are going to pick on you, you know. 'Cause you're little. And you like to read.*

No rolling this time. She's smart enough to predict that for herself. Steve's ass enough to look forward to it, treasure the idea of her future fear and his future bravery.

*Hey, hey, don't worry.* He puffs out his chest. *It's okay, Barbie. I'll*

*protect you.*

He'll protect her, and all the timeouts and parent-teacher meetings and remedial reading (whatever the heck that is), he can forget about those, 'cause, see, he'll have a friend. Someone who needs him. He won't be alone.

Steve can stand anything else. Kicking, punching, the works. As long as he's not alone. He can't be alone.

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He can't.

He's been trying.

He can't be what these kids want him to be, he can't be to them what he never was to Barb, he can't *be*—

+

He's been trying. It's all he can do. And maybe—

+

It's funny how these things work out; he thinks of Barb, now, much more than he thinks of Nancy. And when he does think of Nance, she's likely to morph into Hopper, in the liquid, almost trippy way Steve's thoughts take to, whenever he's drunk or sorry for himself or both.

*Maybe*, they say. The girl who used to be his girlfriend, the man who could be his friend. *Maybe that's enough.*

### **Author's Note:**

Title from "Old Man" by Neil Young. When I started out writing, I expected this story to be more about Steve & Hopper and less about Steve & the kids, but oh well. It still fits.